

**Catalan engineering students in Denmark: the impact of an ELF-environment on fluency and self-confidence levels**

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## **Astract**

This article focuses on the impact of the language policy of a highly internationalized Danish university on two different kinds of exchange engineering students from a mid-size Catalan university: those who attend the Danish university for one semester and those who stay for a whole year with the expectation of staying for even longer. The university is highly internationalized in the sense that (a) half the student population is from forty different countries; and (b) almost all courses are taught in English. The findings come from the discursive analysis of three group discussions, two with Catalan Erasmus students before and after their stay in Denmark and one with teaching and administrative staff from the Danish university. For the short-stay Erasmus students, the combination of an ELF environment (i.e. one in which English is the only feasible lingua franca) with a teaching style that favors student participation in class contributes to an increase in the student's self-confidence and, ultimately, fluency. However, for those students who are considering the possibility of extending their stay and even finding a job in Denmark, the scarce presence of Danish within the university environment distorts their perception of the professional environment in Denmark for which competence in Danish is essential.

**Keywords: Study abroad; ELF; fluency measures; discourse analysis; internationalisation; multilingualism.**

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of the present study is to analyze the impact the language policy of a highly internationalized Danish higher education (HE) institution has had on exchange students from Universitat de Lleida (UdL), a mid-size Catalan university. The Danish institution (VCH) is highly internationalized in the sense that more than half of the student body consists of international students, most of whom have very basic skills (or none) in Danish. This means that both private and institutional communication both inside and outside the classroom is carried out mostly in English. Destinations like Denmark are highly valued amongst students at Universitat de Lleida, and one of

the reasons for this is the perception amongst students that their English will improve a lot as a consequence of this need for English as a Lingua Franca within the institution. Our motivation in this study is to determine whether that is also the perception of our participants, and whether the English improvement actually takes place.

Two kinds of data are employed for this article. On the one hand, the discursive analysis of two group discussions with Catalan Erasmus students before and after their stay in Denmark and a group interview with teaching and administrative staff from VCH, and on the other hand, the measurement of the fluency and accuracy of 10 short monological oral productions.

Section 2 below provides a literature review about the role played by soci-cultural factors in the learning of additional languages. The research questions and the contextual as well as methodological aspects of the study are dealt with in section 3. The results of the analysis are tackled in three different sub-sections in section 4. Section 5 contains the discussion and the conclusion.

## **2. Literature review**

A growing number of studies during the last two decades have focused on the impact of sociocultural factors in the process of learning a foreign language (Lantolf 2009; Larsen-Freeman 1997; Norton-Peirce 1995). Some of these sociocultural factors have to do with the specific context in which this language learning is taking place. Learning a foreign language, and in most cases specifically English, is an important motivation for students who decide to embark on a stay abroad. The expectation is that the context will allow them to return with greater confidence in their use of English, more aware of their communicative skills and of what they can achieve with the target language. There are other concepts in the literature that clearly point towards this same notion. Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014: 361) refer to self-efficacy and report in their study, in which, with the use of questionnaires and elicited journals, they explored the evolution of the beliefs about English language learning of 53 Turkish students who engaged in an Erasmus exchange during the 2011-

2012 spring semester. One of the findings of the investigation was that as a result of their study abroad experiences, their participants “demonstrated a linear transition from lower self-efficacy to higher self-efficacy, which enabled them to feel more confident using English for communicative purposes.” The authors connect the initial low self-efficacy to the grammar-oriented approach followed in most English lessons in Turkey, something that can also be observed in the Spanish context (Aguilar 2003; Tragant *et al.* 2014). In fact, one of the participants in Kaypak and Ortaçtepe’s (2014) study, a Communication student who had stayed in Holland for a semester, argued that “among all those coming from Europe, the worst are the Turkish and Spanish in terms of English” and that “while interacting with the Spanish, I feel like a native speaker of English”.

Self-concept as used by Aragão (2011) and Yoshida (2013) also bears some resemblance in that this increase in self-confidence implies a change in learners’ self-concepts. Yoshida (2013: 936) defines self-concept as “[learners’] beliefs about themselves as FL learners”. According to the author, self-concept does not include the learners’ beliefs about language learning – just their beliefs about themselves as learners (to what I add users, since all learners are, inextricably, users). Emotions are triggered by developments in the learning process, and they have an impact on what learners think about themselves as users/learners of the language. There are negative examples when learners make mistakes and others laugh at them, thus contributing to the undermining of their self-concept. Equally, there are positive examples when learners realize they can achieve much more with the foreign language than they previously thought, which results in the development of a more positive self-concept.

Having established the similarities with the notions of self-efficacy and self-concept, the term self-confidence will be employed in the present study to describe the transformation students go through during their stay. Bretxa *et al.* (2016: 58) define linguistic confidence as a “theoretical construct that combines self-perceived linguistic competence with linguistic anxiety, designed to understand the dynamics of language choices and changing linguistic behaviours.” What learners think of their competence is crucial. The other important element is what they think they can achieve with the

language. To the extent that contact with members of the target language “is relatively frequent and pleasant, self-confidence in one’s ability to use the [target] language will develop” (Clément and Kruidenier 1985), since the levels of anxiety will decrease. This, in turn, will increase the chances of improving the proficiency in that language.

In the same vein, Virkkula and Nikula (2010) analyze the impact of a stay in Germany on seven Finnish engineering students. These students were interviewed before and after the stay abroad in relation to their identities and their language practices, and it was found on their return that they had “more favourable perceptions of themselves as foreign language users who manage to get by despite shortcomings in proficiency” and that “divergence from native speaker norms was often seen as an assertion of one’s identity rather than a problem” (Virkkula and Nikula 2010: 270).

The fact that English has so much presence in HE institutions in the Nordic countries is often associated with the notion of internationalisation: English is necessary in internationalisation processes, as it is normally the most likely lingua franca. Fabricius *et al.* (2017) identify three paradoxes of internationalization, one of which concerns internationalization and linguistic pluralism. The paradox is that although internationalization is supposed to foster greater linguistic diversity, the real outcome is an increase in the use of English. Danish students could benefit from the greater linguistic diversity around them, and international students could learn both Danish and English, but what normally happens is that everyone ends up using English. Danes benefit little from the diversity around them and international students do not learn Danish. As Fabricius *et al.* (2017: 584) put it, “often the use of Danish is explicitly discouraged at international programs” (Fabricius *et al.* 2017: 584).

In the next section, I will describe in some depth the characteristics of VCH, and the role it played in the observed transformation of our subjects.

### **3. Research setting, Data and Methodology**

There are different aspects of Via College Horsens that need to be noted. To start with, 11 of the 25 programs are offered in English and 55% of the student body consists of international students. VCH campus is next to a small town, which adds to the notion of an international bubble within the Danish countryside. These facts can be approached from at least two perspectives. One is more practical: the reality students from Universitat de Lleida encountered on arrival was a campus with many programs in English and with many students coming from a diversity of foreign countries. **All the lessons** UdL students took at VCH were in English, and they lived next to students from different parts of the world with whom they needed to use English for communication purposes. Virkkula and Nikula (2010: 252) refer to “contexts where English is not the mother tongue but is used as a shared language by people from different countries”. At VCH, there might have been only a few students who had English as their L1, but all the students had some knowledge of English. The Catalan students in our study had to use English to talk to people whose L1s were not English on a daily basis, and this was new to them, since back home English was used mostly in English lessons.

Two other academic issues about VCH must be taken into account. On the one hand, the degrees on offer belong to the business, engineering and technology areas: in our case, the five participants in this study were enrolled in engineering degrees. The other aspect is what could be labeled “the Danish or Scandinavian teaching style”. In fact, this is an aspect that is highlighted in the faculties’ information brochures and websites. The defining characteristics of this style, or education culture, are described as follows in a 2012 brochure aimed at international students at VCH:

- 1) alternation, or combination of theory and practice;
- 2) the student is responsible for his/her own education;
- 3) there is an emphasis on contact between lecturers and students, which can be perceived in classroom communication;
- 4) students are asked “to participate actively in the lectures by asking qualified questions”, “to think out of the box” by engaging in real-life projects; and

5) students learn how to work in multicultural teams.

In this brochure, there is a comparison between countries where the lecturer is expected to be responsible for the development of the students (teacher-centered), and Scandinavian countries in general, and Denmark in particular, in which the student is responsible for his/her learning (student-centered).

There is one last aspect of the specific Erasmus exchange between UdL and VCH which is worth highlighting. Of the 130 UdL students who took part in the Erasmus studies program in the 2013-2014 academic year, 49 went to Italy. Denmark was the second destination with regard to number of students, with 14. However, whereas the number of incoming students from Italy was similar (45 students), there were no incoming students from Denmark. This pattern has been consistent at UdL between the academic years 2007 and 2014, with the Catalan university sending a total of 72 students to Denmark but receiving none from Danish universities.

### **3.1 Data**

The data for this project are part of a bigger project that adopted a mixed-methods approach and that aimed at analyzing the effects of study abroad on students from UdL. It was hypothesized that students would improve their English, increase their intercultural skills and acquire a more European identity. The qualitative part of the project focused on students staying at three specific countries: the UK, Denmark, and Italy. These countries were selected because English plays very different roles in each one of them: it is the national and official language in the UK; it is widely used in Denmark; and much less so in Italy, with 86% of Danes but only 34% of Italians declaring themselves capable of holding a conversation in English (European Commission 2012: 21). This article uses some elements from the quantitative and some from the qualitative part of the study: 10 oral productions from 5 students from the quantitative data set, and two focus group discussions and a group interview from the qualitative data set.

The oral productions were part of a language test which was completed by 45 UdL students who were going to take part in Erasmus stays during the 2013-2014 academic year in different European countries. The students also completed 2 questionnaires, and they did it all again on their return. The language test had three sections: a grammar task, a writing task and an oral task. This oral task consisted of a comic strip with 6 drawings with the following instructions: "Please, record yourself narrating what you see in the 6 pictures (5 minutes maximum)." The students were given one minute to prepare what they would say. As mentioned above, 14 UdL students had chosen two higher education institutions in Denmark for their stay abroad. Of these, 12 took part in a focus group discussion before their stay, labeled preFG, and 6 of these 12 were also present in the post focus group discussion, recorded after their stay, and labeled postFG. Of the 12 students in preFG, 9 had chosen VCH and 3 had chosen the other Danish institution. Of the 6 present in postFG, 5 had stayed at VCH and one at the other institution. PreFG and postFG were audio and video-recorded and lasted 96 minutes and 72 minutes, respectively. The group discussions were conducted in Catalan, except for one participant in preFG who used Spanish. Three researchers were present in preFG (Joaquim, Ernest and Sara) and only two of them (Ernest and Sara) participated in postFG. The group interview involved teaching and administrative staff of VCH and was carried out during the first semester of the 2013-2014 academic year as part of a visit of two of the researchers (Joaquim and Sara) to VCH. It has been labeled FGH; it was audio-recorded, and it lasted 49 minutes. Besides the two researchers, the participants were a lecturer (Rakel) and two members of the administration staff (Lotte and Helga). The real names of all the participants have been altered to protect their identities, and they all signed consent forms prior to the data collection.

The main subjects of this study, thus, are Damià, Esteve, Ignasi, Maria and Susanna. They are the five engineering students who spent their stay abroad at VCH and who were present in both focus group discussions. They are also the authors of the 10 stories that have been coded with the prefix pre or post followed by the student's name, so that preDamia corresponds to Damià's oral test before the stay.



#### **4. Analysis**

This section is divided into three sub-section: the first provides the analysis of fluency and accuracy measures of the 10 audio productions; the second and third sub-sections provide two main findings of the qualitative analysis of the data.

##### ***4.1 Fluency and accuracy measures for both short and long-stay Erasmus***

There is a long tradition in SLA to look at fluency and accuracy to determine the proficiency of language learners, and thus their progress in their target language. Fluency has been defined as “the ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, rate and effort” (Starkweather 1987: 12) and accuracy as the “ability to produce error-free language” (Czwenar 2014: 82), but what is ‘normal’ and what is an ‘error’ remains unclear. Fluency varies depending on the task at hand, and different speakers doing the same task might also display different speech rates, for example. And this variability applies to speakers using their mother tongue(s) and speakers using additional languages learned later in life. As for accuracy, what could count as an error in a formal context might be totally acceptable in an informal context, again whether produced by native speakers or not. Although it is true that there is variability amongst the native speakers of a language, it is a fact that it is much smaller than the variability to be found amongst those learning the language as an additional language, with all the different levels from beginner to proficient speaker.

As explained above, the five subjects in the study carried out a language test before and after their stay abroad, and one of the tasks of the test was to orally describe a comic-strip in less than 5 minutes, after having looked at it for about a minute. In order to identify whether the fluency of the students had increased, I decided to focus on temporal measures of fluency. The 10 audio recordings of these tests were subjected to a process in which the stretches of language produced between two pauses were isolated. This ‘stretch of language produced between pauses’ has been chosen as the unit of measurement. I consider 0.5 seconds of unfilled time a pause and filled pauses

as pauses regardless of their length. I have labeled the unit the bp-unit, where bp stands for “between pauses”. An example from preDamià will be used to exemplify the procedure. In 95.75s, Damià says “(1.52) nothing more special the trees (0.96) don’t know the the houses (1.85)”. In this 8.47 seconds, we can identify three pauses of 1.52, 0.96 and 1.85 seconds, and two bp-units of 2.5 and 1.7 seconds. The words (and thus syllables) produced by the student in the two bp-units have been transcribed, but always taking into consideration pronunciation and syllable-separation issues. The focus is not on the number of syllables the word ‘special’ normally contains, but the number of syllables Damià produces, which in this case is three. One can thus determine that the rate in syllables per second of the first bp-unit is 3.2 syllables/second (8 syllables in 2.5 seconds). The rate of the second bp-unit is 5 syllables/1.7 seconds, i.e. 2.94 syllables/second. Note that only 5 of the 6 syllables have been counted in the second bp-unit: this is because repetitions are discounted in order to directly reflect this disfluency mechanism. This is not the case for self-corrections and false starts, which are not penalized in the count.

Five different measures of quantity and four different measures of fluency have been employed. The first measure of quantity, as explained above, is the 'bp-unit' or 'run', which is the stretch of talk between filled or silent pauses. The second is the total response time (TRT), i.e. the time spent producing the task, counting silent pauses, filled pauses and talk. The following two measures amount to splitting this TRT into Speech Time (ST) and Pause Time (PT): the first refers to time spent speaking, i.e. producing meaningful syllables; and the second to time spent pausing, which includes both silent and filled pauses. The last quantity measure is the total number of syllables produced.

Of the four measures of fluency, the first has been adopted and the other three adapted from Ginther *et al.* (2010). The first is the Mean Syllables per Run (MSR), which shows the average number of syllables per run (or bp-unit). The second is the Rate of Speech Time (ROST), which results from dividing the total number of syllables produced in the story by the ST. The third unit is the Average Rate of bp-units (AR/bpu henceforth), which requires two steps: the rate of each bp-unit is

calculated first, and then the average of all the bp-unit rates is established. And the fourth is the Speech Time Ratio (STR), which results from dividing the speech time by the total response time, which is then turned into percentage points.

**Table 1** Fluency measures for the 10 stories

	Damià_p re	Damià_p ost	Maria_p re	Maria_p post	Esteve_p re	Esteve_p ost	Ignasi_ pre	Ignasi_ post	Susana_ pre	Susana_ post
bp-units	18	37	29	32	25	24	12	16	28	24
TRT	51.88	156	87.03	104.57	70.51	81.37	36.49	41.78	84.11	87.66
ST	38.98	102	45.18	62.01	29.67	494.09	24.67	29.33	59.3	67.63
PT	12.9	54	41.85	42.56	40.84	32.28	11.82	12.45	24.81	20.03
syllables	106	308	137	200	110	225	79	100	202	232
MSR	5.89	8.32	4.72	6.25	4.4	9.375	6.58	6.25	7.21	9.67
ROST	2.72	3.02	3.03	3.23	3.71	4.58	3.2	3.41	3.41	3.43
AR/bpu	2.58	3.028	3.18	3.3	3.81	4.62	3.38	3.55	3.32	3.57
STR	75.13	65.38	51.91	59.3	42	60.33	67.6	70.2	70.5	77.15

Table 1 above contains the relevant information about the 5 pre stories and the 5 post stories. A first general finding is that the MSR increases from 5.76 to 7.97 syllables per run on average, which represents an average increase of 38.4%. Ignasi's case is unlike the others, registering a slight decrease of 0.33 syllables per run (i.e. 5%), whereas the other four stories experience important increases. This different behavior does not occur in the ROST and AR/bpu measurements which show a rising tendency in all cases, although with great variations. In ROST measurements, this variation goes from 0.6% in Susana's case to 23.45% in Esteve's, and the average increase is 9.6%. In AR/bpu measurements, this variation goes from 3.8% to 21.3%, and the average increase is 10.92%. In any case, the global picture is that there is a 10% increase in the rate of the bp-units on average, and there is noticeable variability within an upward trend. The last measurement refers to the proportion of speaking and pausing in the responses. It needs to be borne in mind that all post stories were longer than their respective pre stories. In fact, there is an increase of 86.2 syllables on average, from 126.8 syllables on average in the pre stories to 213 syllables on average in the post stories.

The same can be said about the length of the stories, which increases from 66 seconds to 94.3 seconds on average. ST records the greatest increases: from 39.56 seconds to 62 seconds. PT increases because TRT increases, but it decreases in percentage points. This is precisely what STR measures. Figure 1 shows the evolution of STR between the pre and post stories. Although it decreases in Damià's case, there is a remarkable increase in Maria's and Esteve's cases, and there are small increases in Ignasi's and Susana's cases.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In general, then, one can observe that all post stories are longer (measured in seconds and syllables) and told at a faster rate (measured by ROST and AR/bpu). Moreover, in 4 out of 5 cases, the post stories are told through longer stretches of talk (measured by MSR) and pausing less in proportional terms (measured by STR).

The process followed to identify the evolution of the accuracy of the students also started with the transcription of the stories, and again priority was given to the audio recordings of the stories. The audio files were fragmented into smaller files of three different types: those that contained pauses; those containing filled pauses; and the one holding bp-units. All the audio files of the different bp-units of a story were placed in a folder, and a minimum of two members of the research group working on the project described in section 3 above listened to these audio files while reading the transcripts in order to identify false-starts and self-corrections. The three researchers involved in the task had background in Foreign Language teaching and long experience in assessing language proficiency at higher education level. It was important to identify self-corrections because it was decided that errors that were self-corrected would not be counted as errors. In false-starts, students leave sentences unfinished and start new ones and in self-corrections they initially make an error, but they immediately correct the error by repeating the correct parts and changing the mistaken part. The researchers then listened to the audio files again looking for errors.

Three types of errors were established: 1) non-standard unclear pronunciation; 2) inadequate lexical choice; and 3) wrong grammatical choice. Some examples from the different stories will be used to exemplify this typology. Type-1 errors include pronouncing “recipe” as /re'sip/ rather than /res.i.pi/, where the stress moves to the second syllable, and one syllable disappears (post-Damia, bp-unit 8). The sentence “we can see that the boy | pass all the: the water in the hole/” (pre-Susana, bp-units 22 and 23) contains a type-2 error, as the verb “to pass” is not the most appropriate lexical choice in this context. Type-3 includes errors like “they don’t know have to do” rather than “they don’t know what to do” (pre-Susana, bp-unit 8).

After their individual assessments, the researchers met to compare their results. On several occasions, they had to jointly listen to the audio file to finally determine whether a given passage had to be considered an error and of what type. This process raises several interesting questions about what an error is. Ranta (2009) convincingly argues that what many people might perceive as an error might actually be mere language change. Ranta (2009: 98) shows that constructions like the existential 'there is' + plural form (such as “there is a lot of different issues”) happens to be twice more common in a corpus of native speakers than in a corpus of L2 speakers. This attests how important it is in this kind of analysis to look closely at the data and to discuss any discrepancies in depth.

**Table 2** Accuracy measures for the 10 stories

	Damià_p re	Damià_p ost	Maria_p re	Maria_ post	Esteve_p re	Esteve_p ost	Ignasi_ pre	Ignasi_ post	Susana_ pre	Susana_ post
bp-units	18	37	29	32	25	24	12	16	28	24
syllables	106	308	137	200	110	225	79	100	202	232
errors	15	12	9	5	9	7	0	2	9	9
Errors/ 100 syllables	14.2	3.9	6.57	2.5	8.18	3.11	0	2	4.46	3.88

In Table 2 above we can see that in most cases what happens is that the students produce a similar number of errors in much longer stories. The most dramatic reduction is that of Damià, who

produces 15 errors before the stay and 12 errors after the stay. But since he produces almost three times as many syllables in the post story, the number of errors per 100 syllables drops from 14,2 errors to 3,9 errors per 100 syllables. Maria and Esteve follow similar patterns in two senses. On the one hand, there is a less radical decrease, of 62%, in the number of errors per 100 syllables. On the other hand, there is a considerable increase in the number of syllables of the post story: 105% for Esteve and 46% for Maria. Susana and Ignasi produce post stories that only contain a few more syllables and there is a very moderate decrease in errors per 100 syllables in the case of Susana and an increase in the case of Ignasi. In fact, Susana makes 9 errors in both stories, and Ignasi goes from no errors to 2 errors in the post story.

As with fluency, the global picture is that the students have produced either longer stories with fewer errors (Damià, Maria and Esteve) or only slightly longer stories with very little variation in the number of errors (Susana and Ignasi). The combined measurements point towards a general improvement in the students' performance in the task. Housen and Kuiken (2009: 462) point out that whereas accuracy relates “primarily to L2 knowledge representation and to the level of analysis of internalized linguistic information”, fluency “is primarily related to learners’ control over their linguistic L2 knowledge, as reflected in the speed and ease with which they access relevant L2 information to communicate meanings in real time.” On many occasions, the language user/learner can be seen struggling between these two dimensions, sometimes having to choose between sacrificing accuracy for the sake of delivering a more fluent speech, or sacrificing fluency in order to remain more accurate. The measurements provided above indicate that the students have gained in fluency without a negative impact on accuracy. Although we can only be certain in connection to the specific task at hand, the hypothesis that their proficiency has improved in general looks more tangible after these measurements.

#### ***4.2 Teaching style and ELF-environment***

In this section, the purpose is to focus on the roles of spoken and written English at VCH and on the aspects students from UdL mention in connection with the process of adaptation to the academic culture they encounter at the Danish institution. The students argue in postFG that engaging in this methodology has allowed them to gain speaking fluency and self-esteem. This is because in this teaching approach effective communication is more important than correctness and accuracy, a reversal of the conditions in which most of these students learned English back home. In 38m 33s of postFG, Sara asks the students whether they had a harder time speaking or writing in English (see excerpt 1 below – note that English translations of the original contributions in Catalan is provided in the lines immediately below). Ignasi answers ‘speaking’ and argues that this was because one had to ‘improvise in the very moment’. Susanna and Maria agree with him. Maybe because of this support, Ignasi uses the first person plural to present the consequence of the effort: ‘we have more fluency’ (turn 9). One thing is preparing an oral presentation, where the student has time to prepare in advance and rehearse. But in Denmark there were moments when they had to interact in English, and they needed to come up with the contributions on the spot. This improvisation was also much more present in the class sessions. Students in Denmark are asked to actively participate in class, to engage in discussions, and this implies having to improvise your answers.

### Excerpt 1 Fluency

- |    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 1  | Sara    | e:m (.) vos ha costat més parlar/ o escriure<br><i>e:m (.) what was hardest speaking/ or writing</i>   |
| 2  | Ignasi  | a mi parlar potser<br><i>in my case maybe speaking</i>   |
| 3  | Sara    | =parlar=<br>=speaking=   |
| 4  | Ignasi  | =perquè= com que has d'improvitzar al moment/<br>=because= since you have to improvise in the very moment/                                       |
| 5  | Susanna | a mi també<br><i>the same with me</i>  |
| 6  | Ignasi  | a vegades no et ve una paraula i xx xxx<br><i>sometimes a word won't come to you and xx xxx</i>  |
| 7  | Maria   | si (.) jo: segurament<br><i>yes (.) probably me as well</i>  |
| 8  | Sara    | o sigui el parla:r al principi us costava una mica més però després ja:<br><i>so speaking speaking was a bit hard at first but then later on</i> |
| 9  | Ignasi  | però ara ja tenim més =més fluïdesa=<br><i>but I think we have more =fluency=</i>  |
| 10 | Maria   | =després la soltaves= al principi pen=saves_ =   |

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
|           | =later on you just let the word out= at first you =thought=                         |
| 11 Sara   | =com/ com/=   |
|           | =what's that/ what's that/=   |
| 12 Ignasi | ara jo crec que ja tenim més fluïdesa<br><i>I think we now have greater fluency</i> |
| 13 Sara   | a ha (.) heu guanyat això<br><i>I see (.) you've gained this</i>                    |

At this point in the conversation, researcher Ernest jokes that maybe they should all be doing the focus group session in English. Damià, who probably realizes that Ernest has interpreted 'fluency' to mean proficiency, decides to distance himself from the label 'fluency', and argues that rather than being fluent, they are just less afraid of making mistakes now (39m 14s). Ernest proposes that maybe they have abandoned a focus on correctness ("*anglès correcte*") and moved towards a jumping-in-at-the-deep-end mentality ("*tirar-se a la piscina*"), but Maria does not come up with a direct answer: at first, she argues, they spent a long time thinking how to build sentences, what elements to pick when creating the message, whereas, after a while, they would just let the words out, spontaneously, letting others correct the possible mistakes (in 39m 29s). Esteve and Ignasi verbally agree and Ignasi adds: "*ara el que és important és comunicar*" (communicating is what's important now). Damià then points out that, as a matter of fact, once you finally let the words out, people do understand you and Maria agrees with him: maybe you are making grammar mistakes like, for example, wrong verb tenses but you make yourself understood. It is true that Maria and Damià seem to be focusing a lot on the mistakes they say they still make, but the fact remains that they are aware of the fact that communication is what matters, and that when they focus on letting the words out and sending the message through, there are less communication problems than they would have expected. They are now more confident with what they can manage with the language, and this is partly due to having had to improvise inside and outside classrooms.

Written assignments in English also emerged as a topic in postFG. The general impression was that although they did have to write some essays and reports, these were not looked at in any depth, and that it was not really important for the professors ('I don't think they even read them' (Maria in postFG); 'they didn't care much about it' (Esteve in postFG)). In 42m 49s of FGH, Joaquim asks the Danish staff how they deal with the language problems at an academic level, and more



specifically, whether they correct students. Rakel explains that she sends the ones whose English ‘is not good’ to English classes. Otherwise, she puts them in groups with no other Spanish students, so they are forced to use English rather than Spanish to get things done. In 43m 17s, Joaquim asks more directly whether students can fail because of their English (see excerpt 2 below). Rakel’s answer in turn 2 addresses the two parts of the question. Students can fail, in relation to the first part of the question, produced with rising intonation (can they fail/), but they cannot fail because their English is poor, in relation to the second part of the question. Joaquim shows skepticism in turn 3, and offers a scenario: what if a student writes a report and the teacher cannot make sense of it. Rakel admits that in that case students would fail, but provides a reason why this does not happen: students work in groups, so the responsibility for failing is shared amongst them, which means in the end the report is always readable. In turn 11, Joaquim asks whether there is a policy of not failing students because of their language competence. After all, Rakel’s first answer had been a clear no, and although she contemplates the possibility in extreme cases, they remain mostly hypothetical scenarios (they could happen, but...). Rakel does not directly answer the question, but by insisting on the possibility of failing, she is actually rejecting the idea that students cannot be failed because of university policy. It could happen, if the report was really so badly written that it could not be understood and the students’ level was so bad that they had not understood the instructions. This, however, is very rare, although in turn 14 Rakel says “doesn’t happen often anymore”. Earlier on in the group discussion, the English level of Spanish students has been discussed, and current Erasmus students from Spain have been compared positively with previous students.

## **Excerpt 2**     English versus academic skills

- |   |         |  |
|---|---------|--|
| 1 | Joaquim | can they fail/ if their English is not good enough =I mean if they write_ =  |
| 2 | Rakel   | =no not no not= because of their English   |
| 3 | Joaquim | really/ (.) =but if they write a report/ to you (.) and and you can't make =sense=   |
| 4 | Rakel   | =yeah=   |
| 5 | Joaquim | of it  |
| 6 | Rakel   | well [someone coughs] they could_ (h) but I never mm ah: (0.6) usually when they write a report it it would be: made in a group and they have a co_ a responsibility in the group that |
| 7 | Joaquim | ah ok  |
| 8 | Rakel   | that we are able to read (.) the report  |
| 9 | Joaquim | alright  |

10 Rakel ah  
 11 Joaquim so i is it is it a principle here (.) not to fail someone because of their (.) language competence  
 12 Rakel well it could be so bad [quick laugh from someone] that we don't understand what they're saying and they don't understand the ques/tions that we ask and then of course they will fail  
 13 Joaquim yeah  
 14 Rakel but it doesn't happen very often anymore  
 15 Helga no  
 16 Rakel [someone coughs] =it's really\_  
 17 Joaquim =this idea about= group work is very interesting because they can help each other right/  
 18 Rakel yeah  
 19 Sara yeah  
 20 Rakel ah  
 21 Joaquim mm  
 22 Rakel but also for individual exams I think that's (.) we don't have the same language issue (0.7) as we used to have  
 23 Helga no (0.9)  
 24 Rakel we don't (0.6)  
 25 Helga and if (0.6) if they can make themselves understood (.) and they understand the questions and they can show that they (1.4) eh: (0.6) and tell what (.) they have been doing eh: (0.8) they are not (.) evaluated on (.) on the English skills (.) but on their  
 26 Rakel a=academic skill=  
 27 Helga =x xx yeah=

Failing due to low English level was rare in the past, and virtually non-existent in the present. This is what Rakel is referring to in turn 21. It is a better level in general, in group projects and individual exams, and failing someone due to bad English is not happening anymore. In turn 25, Helga adds on Rakel's previous idea of 'understanding' and this is the key element. They need to explain what they have done in the project in a way that can be understood, and they are evaluated on their knowledge and on what they have done, but the quality of the written English is not analyzed following correctness criteria. Helga uses "English skills" as a category for the high written level, and Rakel adds the category "academic skill" to refer, probably, to the content, subject-related skill or knowledge. English is the tool to communicate, not the object of study and/or evaluation.

Academic culture is perpetuated and altered by the members of the culture, students and lecturers, to a great extent. In Denmark, lecturers are described as people who moderate lessons in which students are asked to participate actively, who address students in an informal and teasing tone, and who let students take responsibility for their own learning process. When they check essays, they care more about the content than about the form, and would not fail a student because of poor academic language. As for students, the participants in the group interview refer to students from different countries, Spanish students amongst them. Spanish academic culture comes across as very

different, with a lot of exams and essays, teacher-centered rather than student-centered, and with instructions rather than discussions. This means that when students like those coming from UdL experience the ELF environment and the Danish teaching style, they see themselves in a context with many more opportunities to use English for meaningful communication. They are asked in class and must improvise answers; they do not have the time to monitor their speech and think of the right verb tense, so they just let the words out hoping they will be understood, and they see that they are indeed understood. It is a virtuous-circle, where the favorable context generates more opportunities to practice, and more practice leads to greater proficiency.

#### ***4.3 The role of Danish at VCH***

There is a negative aspect of this context. The students in this study spent several months in Denmark, and yet when asked in postFG what languages other than English they have learned during their stay abroad, the first language to emerge is Czech: Maria explains that she has learned expressions like ‘enjoy your meal’, ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ in Czech (19m 45s). In 20m 20s researcher Sara brings Danish up, but only to confirm that none of them has learned any Danish. She singles out Damià, who took Danish lessons for two months, because he was contemplating the option of looking for a job in Denmark, and asks him why he had not stayed in Denmark in the end, to which he replies: ‘Danish, Danish, Danish, everywhere they asked for Danish’ (21m 28s of postFG).

In the first minutes of FGH, Joaquim asks about the worries exchange students have, and having a sufficient level of English emerges as a topic. In 15m 47s he asks whether they worry about Danish. Lotte refers to a three-week course some students take at the beginning in order to get used to listening to some Danish, and then Helga states: “but they don’t\_ they ‘need not have any worries about the Danish language. All of the lessons being taught in English and most Danes speak English’. A few minutes later, Joaquim insists on the topic, and asks: “do you see [UdL exchange students] interested in Danish at all?” (see excerpt 3 below).

### Excerpt 3 Danish courses

- 1 Joaquim do you see them interested in Danish at all/ (0.22)
- 2 Rakel yeah (0.68)
- 3 Joaquim are they/ (0.84) in what ways how do they express that (0.15)
- 4 Helga that some eh: (c) some of them the:y sign up for Danish language course (0.35) eh: 'outside the school
- 5 Joaquim mm mm (1.4) ok (0.7) so they look around on their own and they find courses/
- 6 Rakel there's a language center
- 7 Helga we have a language center and they they can (0.2) sign up for\_

Rakel quickly replies in the affirmative, but Joaquim's 'are they/' in turn 3 sounds quite skeptical. He asks them to indicate how students express this interest, and Helga explains that some students enroll in Danish courses 'outside the school'. Joaquim continues by saying that interprets students have to look for a place outside the higher education institution to study the language. Rakel replies that 'there is' a language center, but Helga phrases it as 'we have' a language center, which would suggest that students can study Danish at a language center within the university. One way to interpret it would be that this is something students can do at a center within the institution but away from their academic subjects.

Joaquim then asks them why they think these students are interested in Danish, and two main reasons emerge. Helga argues that Spanish students who are on a full-degree program, and who are thus going to stay longer than a semester, want to be 'part of the city life', but Rakel believes that Danish people are 'quite closed', and that it is 'not easy to get into a Danish community'. This is why she thinks that their main motivation is finding an internship or job, since they know that they need some Danish for that.

On the one hand, exchange students need not worry about Danish, since all the lessons are in English and most Danes speak English. On the other hand, some full-degree students take Danish courses, either because they want to integrate or because they want to find a job. But what happens when an exchange student decides to prolong their stay in Denmark? The reality is that all the elements that have favored these students' gain in self-confidence and English proficiency work against the plan. That is the consequence of the paradox about linguistic pluralism in internationalization discussed earlier, and this is something these kinds of students discover too late in the stay.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

There are two main findings from this study. On the one hand, fluency and accuracy measurements indicate an increase of these features that point towards an increase in the proficiency of the subjects. On the other hand, students report and show greater self-confidence about their English, and two factors have been identified as explicative for this greater level of self-confidence. The first factor would be the nature of the university environment, which could be defined as an ELF environment, i.e. an environment in which English is not only the language of instruction in the lessons, but also the dominant means of communication outside the class given the diversity of L1s of the student population. The second factor would be the prevailing teaching style at VCH. Although this applies to the five students, the fact is that one of the students experienced what could be seen as the other side of the coin. After having extended his stay from one semester to two, the student was considering prolonging his stay even longer, but it then dawned on him that Danish was a requirement to find employment in the country. In other words, whereas for the Erasmus students who only stay for a semester, the combination of an ELF environment (i.e. one in which English is the only feasible lingua franca) with a teaching style that favors student participation in class contributes to an increase in the student's self-confidence and, ultimately, fluency, for those students who are considering the possibility of extending their stay and even finding a job in Denmark, the scarce presence of Danish within the environment of the HE institution distorts their perception of the professional environment in Denmark for which competence in Danish is essential.

Although learning a language is also a cognitive process, the socio-cultural strand of SLA has long demonstrated that language learning is a social process in which many factors intervene. One of the key elements to learn a language is the presence of learning opportunities, and this paper has shown how the context of a highly internationalized Danish HE institution is a very favorable context to learn English. On the one hand, lessons are in English and they are delivered in a teaching style that

puts the student at the center of the process and that places the focus on communication rather than language accuracy. On the other hand, English is the only feasible lingua franca, and since most Danes have a high level of English, English is used regularly also outside the classroom. The only negative note in this otherwise positive picture is that, in this context, the local language loses much weight and relevance, thus making integration into the host culture, an already difficult task in any community, an even harder task than normal.

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## **Appendix I**            Transcription convention

- (.)     short pause
- (0.5)   pause of, in this case, half a second
- /       rising intonation
- =       overlapping
- xxx     unintelligible speech
- :       vowel lengthening
- (c)     coughing
- (h)     heavy breathing
- [ ]      side comments
- \_       false start or unfinished thought

## **Figure 1**            Evolution of STR from pre to post stories



